"Let Your Speech Always Be Gracious"

PASTORAL LETTER ON THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

EPISCOPAL COMMISSION FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE
CANADIAN CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS

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LET YOUR SPEECH ALWAYS BE GRACIOUS, SEASONED WITH SALT, SO THAT YOU MAY KNOW HOW YOU OUGHT TO ANSWER EVERYONE.

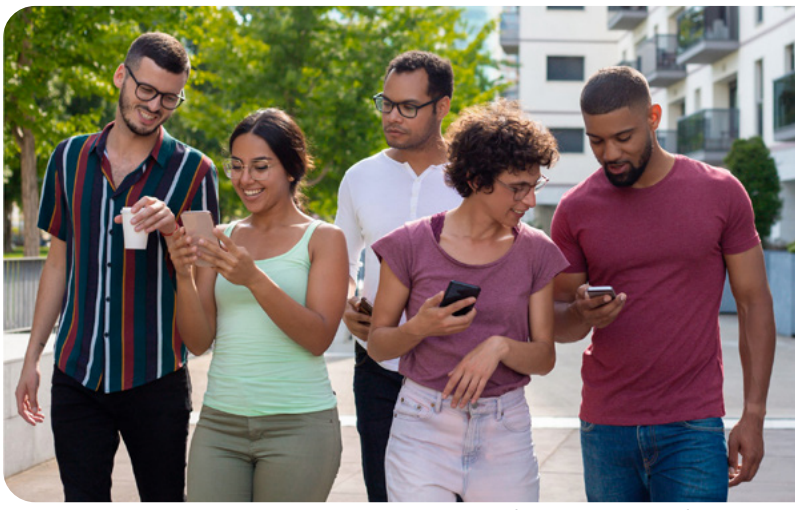
— Colossians 4:6

INTRODUCTION

1. Twenty years ago, few of us would have even heard the term "social media." Now it permeates almost every aspect of our lives. We use it to keep in contact with family and friends and distant cousins. We read both neighbourhood, national, and international news on it. We connect with strangers who share our interests and hobbies. We discover events in which we want to participate and videos that make us laugh. Currently, 87% of the Canadians who have access to the internet are active on social media.[1] By 2026, that number is expected to climb to 96%.[2] The average Canadian social media user has 6.4 accounts and spends an average of 1 hour and 56 minutes per day perusing various platforms.[3]

2. On one hand, we could say that social media is simply one more way we have developed to communicate with others—the latest in an ever-growing repertoire of possibilities that over the course of human history has included everything from sign language to the spoken word to written texts. Like every mode of communication, it exists to serve a fundamental human good: the building of bridges among people by the sharing of information. As Pope Benedict XVI observed, this desire to connect with others—whatever the mode—is a beautiful thing: "When we find ourselves drawn towards other people, when we want to know more about them and make ourselves known to them, we are responding to God's call – a call that is imprinted in our nature as beings created in the image and likeness of God, the God of communication and communion."[4]

3. On the other hand, social media is unique in terms of its speed and its reach. Unlike at any other time in human history, massive numbers of people are now able to communicate almost



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1 Simon Kemp, Digital 2022: April Global Statshot Report, *DataReportal*, April 21, 2022, slide #112, "Social Media Users versus Population".

2 S. Dixon, "Canada: Social Network Penetration 2018–2027," *Statista*, February 13, 2023.

3 Kemp, Digital 2022, slide #116, "Daily Time Spent Using Social Media," and slide #124, "Average Number of Social Media Platforms Used."

4 Benedict XVI, "New Technologies, New Relationships: Promoting a Culture of Respect, Dialogue and Friendship," Message of the Holy Father Benedict XVI for the 43rd World Communications Day, May 24, 2009.

instantaneously. And, while social media's speed and reach exponentially increase the potential good it can do, they also increase the potential harm it can do. Even if we do not use social media ourselves, we are impacted by the role it plays in the spread of misinformation, the coarsening of civil discourse, the radicalization of political systems, and the mental health crisis that is especially prevalent among our youth. As such, we realize that social media is worthy of our special attention and reflection.

4. Just last year, the Holy See's Dicastery for Communication released a pastoral reflection on social media titled *Towards Full Presence*. Building on the parable of the Good Samaritan, this reflection considers how we can be loving neighbours to each other online.[5] Over the past two decades, Popes Benedict XVI and Francis have attended to and reflected on both the promise and the challenge of social media in their annual World Communications Day[6] messages and, more recently, in Francis' 2020 encyclical *Fratelli tutti*: *On Fraternity and Social Friendship*. The Popes have encouraged Catholic Christians to engage social media boldly, embracing new platforms to foster and sustain meaningful relationships and even to share faith with others.[7] At the same time, they have warned against naiveté. The design of the platforms and the algorithms that dictate their performance can play on the worst of our human tendencies, leading to online environments that violate the core Christian values of truth and human dignity. As Pope Francis notes, "Digital relationships, which do not demand the slow and gradual cultivation of friendships, stable interaction or the building of a consensus that matures over time, have the appearance of sociability. Yet they do not really build community."[8] Social media can give the illusion of creating bridges between people when it is in fact tearing apart our common life.[9]

A CALL TO ALL CANADIAN CATHOLICS

5. As Catholic Bishops in Canada, we share the Popes' hopes and concerns about the role of social media in modern life. As we talk to those we pastor in our dioceses and as we engage in social media ourselves, we see the potential of putting new platforms in the service of Jesus' vision of the Kingdom of God. We see how the communication that takes place online could enhance global friendship and the promotion of

"SOCIAL MEDIA EXISTS TO SERVE A FUNDAMENTAL HUMAN GOOD: THE BUILDING OF BRIDGES AMONG PEOPLE BY THE SHARING OF INFORMATION."

5 The pastoral reflection, as well as additional resources, are available at https://www.fullypresent.website/en.html.

6 World Communications Day website, https://www.comunicazione.va/en/giornata-mondiale-comunicazioni-sociali.html.

7 Benedict XVI, Message for World Communications Day, 2009.

8 Francis, Encyclical Letter *Fratelli tutti* (2020), 43.

9 Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, 42–50.

worldwide justice and peace. We admire the creative work of our Catholic parishes, schools, and other organizations to keep people abreast of goings on and opportunities for greater participation in local faith communities. We see the ways that our Catholic newspapers and TV stations, magazines, and journals are transforming themselves in order to reach an ever-broader audience. Drawing on the words of Pope Benedict XVI, we acknowledge that we have before us a new "digital continent"[10] in which to share and live the Christian life.

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6. We applaud the missionary spirit of those who have felt a call to witness explicitly to their Christian faith through social media—sharing quality resources about the faith; inviting friends to visit their parish or come on a retreat; celebrating Catholic feasts and practices online. We welcome more of this! At the same time, we recognize that the most fundamental way we witness to our faith is by the quality of our lives—how we treat other people; how we handle our disagreements; how we respond to challenges and disappointments. Indeed, whether we choose to be explicit about our faith on social media platforms or not, *all of us* are called to ensure that our conduct online gives witness to Christian virtue. For example, if we share our Catholic faith with others online, but do so in ways that are not grounded in charity, prudence, and truth, we may end up doing harm rather than good.[11]

7. At this time, we call on all Canadian Catholics to pause and reflect—both individually and communally—on their engagement with social media and on how they might be part of the larger effort to claim the "digital continent" for Christ, most particularly by the quality of their conduct online.

"THE MOST FUNDAMENTAL WAY WE WITNESS TO OUR FAITH IS BY THE QUALITY OF OUR LIVES—HOW WE TREAT OTHER PEOPLE; HOW WE HANDLE OUR DISAGREEMENTS; HOW WE RESPOND TO CHALLENGES AND DISAPPOINTMENTS."

10 Benedict XVI, Message for World Communications Day, 2009.

11 Francis, Fratelli tutti, 46.

SEVEN COMMITMENTS WE CAN MAKE TOGETHER

8. The Episcopal Commission for Justice and Peace invites all who use social media to join us in making the following seven commitments as a way to witness to core Christian values and help build a healthy online environment that serves the common good. We commit to…

CHECK FOR ACCURACY

9. A commitment to truth lies at the centre of the Christian life. The great Doctor of the Church Saint Thomas Aquinas describes truth as *adaequatio rei et intellectus* ("the correspondence of the thing to the intellect") or—in everyday language—having a picture of things in your mind that is aligned with how they are in reality.[12] While reality is vast, and we will never have a complete picture of it in our minds, as Christians we always commit to trying to make sure that we align what is in our minds, as best as we are able, with what is real. This is not an easy commitment to live out on social media.

10. As each of us attempts to build connections and healthy online communities, we do so on platforms congested with content posted by others: some who are known to us and others who are not; some of whom share our commitment to seeking truth and others who do not. One of the most dangerous dynamics in social media today is the proliferation of misinformation, disinformation, and "fake news." Many posts intend to deceive or manipulate readers to serve an agenda, be it political, economic, social, or even personal. Pope Francis notes, "We need to unmask what could be called the 'snake-tactics' used by those who disguise themselves in order to strike at any time and place. This was the strategy employed by the 'crafty serpent' in the Book of Genesis, who, at the dawn of humanity, created the first fake news, which began the tragic history of human sin."[13]

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11. We should all be cautious about online information generated to deceive or manipulate others, regardless of the reason; in all such cases, we should take care not to spread it. As Christians, our commitment to truth necessarily implies a commitment to accuracy. There are certain tools we can rely upon to help us establish the accuracy of the information we encounter online, such as our own critical judgment, as well as objective information about the trustworthiness of the source and of its specific claims. Of course, there can be legitimate reasons for sharing or engaging with doubtful or uncertain information as long as it is done in good faith, is motivated by a desire for the truth,

12 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 16.

13 Francis, Message for World Communications Day, 2018.

"A FULSOME COMMITMENT TO TRUTH ALWAYS IMPLIES A CONCERN FOR THE PERSONHOOD OF THE OTHER."

and is mindful of the inherent dignity of the person and the common good. We should never use social media with the intent to manipulate, to deceive others, or to tarnish someone's reputation.

SEEK GREATER PERSPECTIVE

12. Pope Francis reminds us that part of "the difficulty of unmasking and eliminating fake news is due … to the fact that many people interact in homogeneous digital environments impervious to differing perspectives and opinions."[14] The Christian commitment to truth implies not only that we pursue what is real, but also that we look at the vastness of reality from a wealth of angles. The danger of "fake news" on social media exists alongside the danger of echo chambers in which we read only from a narrow set of sources and engage with a narrow set of like-minded voices that reconfirm what we already believe rather than broadening our understanding of reality.

Photo: Santiago Meja LC/Cathopic

13. Social media platforms benefit financially from keeping people online as long as possible; these platforms have learned that one way of doing so is to continue to feed us information and perspectives that we already agree with. When we demonstrate interest in a particular topic and linger there, platforms will continue to send us further content on that topic and put us into contact with people who share similar opinions. If we want to demonstrate a commitment to looking at the breadth of reality from multiple angles, we will need to be intentional about seeking information from sources to which we are not already inclined or predisposed. Furthermore, in order to reverse the trends toward polarization and political radicalization, it can be beneficial to glean information from a variety of trustworthy sources and to connect online with individuals across political, racial, ethnic, and religious divides who share a common longing to seek what is true.

VALUE HUMAN DIGNITY

14. In addition to pursuing truth, in terms of both accuracy and breadth, even when using social media, Pope Francis reminds us that we must *be true* to one another online. Considering the way that social media conversations—even among Christians—too often unfold, he notes,

14 Francis, Message for World Communications Day, 2018.

"An impeccable argument can indeed rest on undeniable facts, but if it is used to hurt another and to discredit that person in the eyes of others, however correct it may appear, it is not truthful."[15] A fulsome commitment to truth always implies a concern for the personhood of the other.

15. Remembering the personhood of those with whom we enter into conversation on social media can be difficult. The fact that on most platforms we see only a small headshot of the person on the screen—if that—perhaps inclines us to treat persons as if they were *only* heads, in essence *only* a sum of their thoughts and ideas. It is easy to forget that behind those thoughts and ideas are real people who, just like us, have bad days and good days, experience a wide range of emotions, make mistakes, and lead complicated lives. Even when we disagree with what others post and when we understand their views to be misguided, we must maintain a commitment to treat them with human dignity.

16. Sadly, even those who are deeply committed to sharing about the Catholic faith have sometimes failed in this regard. "Even in Catholic media," Pope Francis reminds us, "limits can be overstepped, defamation and slander can become commonplace, and all ethical standards and respect for the good name of others can be abandoned."[16] It is important that there always be an alignment between the truth we are trying to share and how we go about sharing it. We will not come to know a God of love through any communication that is not itself loving.

17. While we can be "hard" on identifying erroneous information and courageous in bringing up our own perspective, we should always be "soft" on people by assuming good intent and not conflating their ideas with their very personhood. We challenge social media users to avoid all *ad hominem* comments in which persons are attacked rather than their ideas confronted. We challenge users not to post online any comment that they would not be willing to say to the other person face to face with fellow Christians present.

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BRING CURIOSITY INTO THE CONVERSATION

18. One important way that we demonstrate our commitment to human dignity when we disagree is to begin by assuming there may be something that we do not yet understand in the other's perspective or behaviour. Rather than

15 Francis, Message for World Communications Day, 2018.

16 Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, 46. For a fuller reference, see Francis, *Gaudete et exsultate* (2018), 115.

entering into online conversation by making contrary statements, we can start by asking ourselves a few questions. Is the difference between us due to the fact that we have sources of information and access to facts that the other is not aware of? Is the difference due to each of us weighing and interpreting the facts in a different way? Why is this important to the other? What is at stake for them here? How might they be impacted by this issue in their own life? How might this topic stir fear or anxiety for them? Should we decide to enter into conversation with another online, we can then start from a stance of curiosity. Whatever we post in response should seek to open dialogue rather than close it by simply trading debate points.

19. Pope Francis is forthright about the qualities needed to engage in real dialogue: "What is it, then, that helps us, in the digital environment, to grow in humanity and mutual understanding? We need, for example, to recover a certain sense of deliberateness and calm. This calls for time and the ability to be silent and to listen. We need also to be patient if we want to understand those who are different from us."[17] On social media platforms, the rapid back-and-forth of interaction, with limited non-verbal clues to how one's words are being received—and, in some cases, a limited number of characters available—does not easily lend itself to deep listening. Online conversations, Francis notes, "lack the physical gestures, facial expressions, moments of silence, body language and even the smells, the trembling of hands, the blushes and perspiration that speak to us and are a part of human communication."[18] If we want to enter into substantive conversation with someone we care about concerning a topic we care about, it makes the most sense to move the conversation offline. It is easier to convey a desire to listen when we are face to face.

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DISTINGUISH BETWEEN INTENTION AND IMPACT

20. When we enter into a conversation assuming that we already understand another person's perspective, it is a short leap to assuming that we also understand what is motivating the person to take this stance or to behave in this way. And generally, our assessment of motive is not a positive one. When we find another person's post offensive, in poor taste, or ignorant, we will tend to think that they meant to be offensive or tasteless, or if they didn't know that what they posted was ignorant, they are lacking basic common sense. We will tend to conflate bad impact on us with bad intention on the

17 Francis, Message for World Communications Day, 2014.

18 Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, 43.

other's part. Ironically, however, when we post something that others find offensive, in poor taste, or ignorant, and they react accordingly, we will tend to feel misunderstood. We expect that others will know we had good intentions and should not be upset with us. We believe them to be overreacting.

21. One of the most helpful things that we as Christians can do in the online world is distinguish between intention and impact, realizing that it is possible to simultaneously mean well and still cause harm, just as it is possible for us to be hurt and for the other person not to have intended our hurt. When sensibilities have been stepped on, we can ask social media users to slow the conversation down by asking about what others' intentions are as well as what the impact of their words has been on others.

22. Slowing down is not easy. Again, social media platforms are often designed to keep users on for as long as possible; one way they have learned to keep us online is by pushing emotionally provocative posts to the top of our feeds. Posts that make us angry or upset get more attention and keep us scrolling for longer periods of time. Consuming a diet bloated with outrage, however, is good for no one. In the words of Pope Francis, the online environment will be a healthy one only when it is populated by "people who are attracted by goodness and take responsibility for how they use language."[19]

PRIVILEGE "IRL" ENCOUNTERS

23. Thus far, we have considered what it looks like to show up as a Christian online, but we must also be attentive to the impact of our online time on the rest of our lives, especially our relationships with those we meet IRL (in real life). In 2011, Pope Benedict XVI observed the amount of time spent on social media and wondered, "Does the danger exist that we may be less present to those whom we encounter in our everyday life? Is there a risk of being more distracted because our attention is fragmented and absorbed in a world 'other' than the one in

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"IT IS POSSIBLE TO SIMULTANEOUSLY MEAN WELL AND STILL CAUSE HARM, JUST AS IT IS POSSIBLE FOR US TO BE HURT AND FOR THE OTHER PERSON NOT TO HAVE INTENDED OUR HURT."

19 Francis, Message for World Communications Day, 2018.

which we live?"[20] More than a decade later, we can answer in the affirmative. Yes, there is a danger, and the risks are now well documented. In fact, the behaviour of paying more attention to one's phone than to the persons one is actually with now has a name—phubbing (a contraction of the term "phone snubbing")—and it has been shown to decrease enjoyment of face-to-face interactions in the moment while increasing anxiety.[21] Over the long haul, phubbing leads to more shallow interactions in which people do not develop the kinds of deep and lasting relationships that sustain and mature us as human beings.

24. We must remember that the God we have come to know as Christians is not one who was content with connecting with us from afar; instead, God chose to take on our human flesh to eat with us and pray with us, talk with us, lay hands on us, even die our death. Social media can be a powerful way of making new connections and nurturing old ones, but it can never be an end in itself. It should enrich, not diminish, face-to-face encounter. As Pope Francis reminds us, social media is intended to complement, not replace, "an encounter in the flesh that comes alive through the body, heart, eyes, gaze, breath of the other. If [social media] is used as an extension or expectation of such an encounter, then [it] … remains a resource for communion. If a family uses [social media] to be more connected, to then meet at table and look into each other's eyes, then it is a resource. If a Church community coordinates its activity through [social media] and then celebrates the Eucharist together, then it is a resource."[22] The implication is that if social media does not lead to more profound physical presence with one another in the larger picture, then it is no longer a helpful resource for the Christian life. We need to prioritize being present to those with whom we share a physical environment.

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TEND TO OUR TIME SPENT ONLINE

25. Of particular concern to us as Bishops is research indicating the amount of time persons are spending on social media and the effect that such extensive use has on users' mental health

20 Benedict XVI, Message for World Communications Day, 2011.

21 See Ryan J. Dwyer et al., "Smartphone use undermines enjoyment of face-to-face social interactions," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 78 (Sept. 2018): 233–39; and Fortuna Procentese et al., "Families and Social Media Use: The Role of Parents' Perceptions about Social Media Impact on Family Systems in the Relationship between Family Collective Efficacy and Open Communication," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 16:4 (Dec. 2019): 5006.

22 Francis, Message for World Communications Day, 2019.

and general well-being. Given the average global human life span of 73.4 years, with the average global social media user engaging for 147 minutes per day, at present each of us will spend an estimated six years and eight months of our lives on social media, in contrast to three years and seven months spent eating and drinking.[23] In a faith tradition that treasures table fellowship, that is no small thing. And when we consider that the average teen now spends approximately 180 minutes per day on social media, we are even more taken aback.[24] How will the percentage of time our youth spend on social media impact the quality of their lives for many years to come?

26. Over a decade ago, Benedict XVI noted that "If the desire for virtual connectedness becomes obsessive, it may in fact function to isolate individuals from real social interaction while also disrupting the patterns of rest, silence and reflection that are necessary for healthy human development."[25] We share this worry. We are concerned that time spent online will not only negatively impact deepening relations with close family and friends, but also cut into the time we spend in prayer, exercise, civic activity, nature, sleep, and the other goods of life.

"GOD DOES NOT WANT US TO FEEL CHAINED TO OUR DEVICES."

27. A growing number of social media users report experiencing addiction-like behaviours: a desire to compulsively check their accounts; mood changes if they are not on social media; relapse after they've tried to step away. Throughout scripture, we see God's desire for human freedom from every form of slavery. We can be certain that God does not want us to feel chained to our devices. We call on all users to monitor the amount of time they spend on social media and to question whether it aligns with the amount of time they *want* to spend. We support the practice of taking a "Technology Sabbath"—a full day without screen time—each week, and we encourage users to seek the help of others if they are engaging social media in a way that is detrimental to their own well-being.

Photo: Suwaree Tangbovornpichet/iStock.com

23 Based on the 147 minutes per day average recorded in 2022: see S. Dixon, "Average Daily Time Spent on Social Media Worldwide 2012-2022," *Statista* (Aug 22, 2022). Averages compiled by Broadband Search using statistics gleaned from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics in 2019–2020.

24 *Common Sense Media*, The Common Sense Census: Media Use by Tweens and Teens, 2021 (2022). This number includes video viewing on platforms like TikTok and YouTube.

25 Benedict XVI, Message for World Communications Day, 2009.

COMING TOGETHER TO TEND TO THE COMMON GOOD

28. The above seven commitments are ones that each of us can make personally to change the social media landscape, one post at a time. The gift of belonging to a global faith community, however, is that we can also harness our energies to pull human society forward as a whole, one nation at a time. We believe the moment is ripe to consider what we might do together as Canadian Catholics to advocate for a healthier online environment that serves the common good.

29. While legislation related to social media is developing and changing and cannot be addressed in a pastoral letter such as this, we want to urge and support legislation that seeks to foster truthfulness and respect for human dignity on social media platforms. This includes legislative efforts to work with social media platforms to quell violent content and abusive trolling.

30. We ask our Catholic school boards and parishes to consider what they might do to promote media literacy in their own settings. We all need to educate ourselves about how to engage modern media with greater intentionality and care, aware of the ways in which we are being shaped by these platforms even as we work to shape them. We encourage book studies and evenings of reflection, curricular development and speakers' series around healthy social media use. Examinations of conscience should include introspection about our own social media use. Preaching should foster links to online behaviour and Christian living. Our Catholic universities, theology schools, and seminaries can be places of proactive critical thinking around the future of social media.

31. Our expectation is that our own Catholic institutions and media outlets will hold themselves to the highest standard in assuring that their online posting adheres to the greatest degree of accuracy and truthfulness possible, while also prioritizing Christian charity and human dignity. Others will model what they see us doing, and we want to demonstrate great virtue in this regard.

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32. Individually and together, we commit to moving forward with courage, aware of both the great potential and the great challenges of this new way of communicating with one another.

Joining in prayer with Pope Francis, we lift up our voices to the Lord, asking that every effort we make in this emerging arena might serve God's greater design:

Lord, make us instruments of your peace.
Help us to recognize the evil latent in a communication that does not build communion.
Help us to remove the venom from our judgments.
Help us to speak about others as our brothers and sisters.
You are faithful and trustworthy; may our words be seeds of goodness for the world:
where there is shouting, let us practise listening;
where there is confusion, let us inspire harmony;
where there is ambiguity, let us bring clarity;
where there is exclusion, let us offer solidarity;
where there is sensationalism, let us use sobriety;
where there is superficiality, let us raise real questions;
where there is prejudice, let us awaken trust;
where there is hostility, let us bring respect;
where there is falsehood, let us bring truth.
Amen.[26]

26 Francis, Message for World Communications Day, 2018.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Are you currently on social media? Why did you decide to engage in social media? Has it lived up to your expectations? In what ways?
- What are your hopes related to social media in your life? In Canada? What are your concerns or fears?
- Do you associate social media more with the building up of relationships or the tearing apart of relationships? More with the deepening of relationships or greater distraction in your relationships? What kinds of behaviours have you witnessed that incline outcomes in one direction versus the other?
- This pastoral letter calls for a commitment to truth in what one reads and shares on social media, in terms of both accuracy and breadth. Which of these two dimensions (accuracy or breadth) is more challenging for you? How do you figure out whether something on social media is true?
- This pastoral letter reminds us that a commitment to truth also demands that we be true to one another by honouring the human dignity of the other and assuming good intentions on their part. Where have you found this most challenging to uphold in your own social media engagement?
- If you see something that disturbs you on social media, how do you decide whether to enter into conversation with the other person or simply to scroll past their post? Have you tried other options for engagement?
- Do you have any rules in your own home around the use of devices at the dinner table? Before bed? How much screen time per day? On a scale of 1 to 10, how are these rules working?
- Are you content with the amount of time you spend on social media? Do you wish you could spend less or more time on it? How do you try to keep your social media usage in check relative to other priorities in your life?
- When you consider what your family / parish / school community might do to promote a healthy social media environment for all, what ideas come to mind? How could you put these ideas into practice?

Episcopal Commission for Justice and Peace

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